Remarks by Senator Barack Obama
A Common Humanity Through Common Security
South African Institute for International Affairs
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People often ask me how I got involved in politics. I tell them that I was not born into a political family; I was not active in student government in high school. But, when I was in college, there was one issue that moved me for the first time in my life to become politically active and play a leadership role in my community.

The issue was apartheid. And, as a young college student, I became deeply involved with the divestment movement in the United States.

I remember meeting with a group of ANC leaders, hearing the stories of their struggles of freedom and their leader Nelson Mandela.

I tell this story, from time to time in the United States, to remind audiences that America simply has not been an exporter of a democracy and freedom. We have also been inspired by the struggles in other nations that have, in turn, helped shape and perfect the very freedoms and rights held dear by citizens of my own country.

The relationship between the United States and South Africa is classic example of this interplay. Mahatma Gandhi began his quest for India's independence here in South Africa. Gandhi's courage and commitment was an inspiration for Dr. King.

The early successes of Dr. King and the civil rights movement, in turn, helped move South Africans, like those in the ANC leadership, to take action again the immoral and inhumane apartheid regime. Coming full circle, the struggles of South African activists in the 1970's, 1980's, and into the 1990's sparked the political consciousness of my generation.

It is likely that I would not be here today speaking to you as a United States Senator had I not met with those ANC members one day in New York City.

As I stood in Nelson Mandela's cell yesterday, I reflected upon his courage, foresight, and conviction. These are the values that laid the foundation for the new South Africa. And, over the past decade, these are the values have transformed South Africa into a dynamic nation and a powerful symbol that reminds us, each and every day, that across oceans and continents, we all share the desire for freedom, dignity, and a better future.

But history does not stand still. Even as the apartheid regime was cast onto the ash-heap of history, new evils and threats to our freedoms and dignity have emerged from a world that is fundamentally different than it was forty, twenty-five, or even ten years ago – a world that revolutions in technology and communication has rendered smaller and more connected than at any time in human history.

These newer, transnational threats – pandemic health crises like AIDS or the avian flu, nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism, environmental degradation, narco-trafficking, and – are now everyone's problem. They bind us together more than they divide us; here in Africa, they have hit particularly hard.

These common threats are most likely to emerge from relatively remote and poor regions where there is little or no effective government presence.

They thrive where corruption is rife and the majority of the population is impoverished and uneducated. And they can tear apart the social, economic, and political fabric of a region in a matter of days.

Make no mistake, threats to international stability still remain from oppressive regimes and nuclear intentions, such as Iran and North Korea. Many also worry, rightly so, about regional conflicts – like the seven African countries that battled in the Congo a few years back – that envelop large areas and thousands of people with bloodshed and suffering.

But increasingly, the free travel of people and goods across borders – the life-blood of the global economy – has created the ideal environment for the kind of threats that can race across borders and consume the entire planet.

What all of this means is that now, more than ever, we must care about each other's problems – not just when there's a missile pointed at us or a dictator on the march, but wherever conditions exist that could give rise to human suffering on a massive scale, be it poverty or disease, oppression or lawlessness, terror or genocide.

And so I think it's time that in my country and all countries, we begin to promote a fuller freedom, a more empowering democracy than many around the world have come to expect from us in recent years.

Half a century ago, as one of America's greatest Presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, prepared to send the United States to war, he spoke of a victory that would uphold four human freedoms above all else – the freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

Today, we must realize that for billions in the developing world, it is these last two basic freedoms – from want and from fear – that are prerequisites for all others.

For states that cannot secure these basic freedoms for their people, elections alone will not save their societies from chaos and strife.

And at a time when the deadliest threats know no borders and thrive in the weakest of states, it is both a moral and practical imperative that our nation and all nations focus our international efforts – our diplomacy, our institutions, our economic and humanitarian assistance – on enhancing the personal and material security of people in the world's ungoverned and under-governed spaces.

Doing so will enhance the security of all nations in three ways:

First, and most obviously, it will reduce the risk of conditions that serve as incubators for common threats, that transcend national borders, in the first place.

After all, it is within the confines of an impoverished society that the seeds of conflict are often sown. For example, an Oxford University economist recently found that if a country's per capita income doubles, its risk of conflict drops by roughly half. And, as we know all too well, it is these conflict zones that breed poverty, misery, and disease – while creating havens for groups bent on destroying the hopes and aspirations of others for a better life.

Second, if we don't step in to help these states, others will. They will be rebel leaders, they will be war criminals, they will be terrorists, and they will be looking to recruit more people to their cause by providing education, nutrition, and physical security to vulnerable populations.

In Liberia, experts attribute the election of Charles Taylor largely to the fact that people simply wanted the fighting to end so they could go about meeting the basic needs of their everyday lives – a tragic hope summed up in the slogan "He killed my ma, he killed my pa, but I will vote for him." Of course, what followed from this election was more bloodshed and another costly intervention by the international community.

This is why we must pay attention. If our children do not have the opportunity to get a decent education, they become increasingly susceptible to alienation and exploitation. If our children cannot find jobs, rebel groups in Africa or gangs in the United States can lead them down a path of violence and hatred.

It is therefore the job of local leaders and the international community to provide hope, to provide opportunity, and to provide a better way of life.

Finally, building the capacity of weaker states means gaining new partners in the battle against today's threats – partners who can work together to combat common threats.

Nations like Ghana and Thailand, once ruled by repressive regimes with little moral authority, are increasingly seen as critical partners in these efforts – from votes in the Security Council to providing resources and expertise needed to tackle difficult and dangerous international problems.

This is why we must launch a new effort to strengthen these weak states and build capacity in undergoverned spaces. And so, there's a few things often overlooked by those who focus on purely military solutions that both we in America and other nations could do more of to meet these challenges.

To further strengthen the capacity of governments to care for their people, we must transform our own institution-building efforts from a piecemeal approach to a larger, coordinated strategy.

Right now, when America assists other countries, our federal agencies go off and work with their counterparts in other nations -- Defense Department works with the Ministry of Defense, the Treasury Department with the Ministry of Finance, and the Department of Health and Human Services works with the Ministry of Health.

To be sure, a significant amount of resources and very good people are working on these issues, but there does not seem to be any overarching strategy or effective coordination to pull all of these threads together.

The Bush Administration recently set up a new office at the State Department, called the Director of Foreign Assistance. I believe that one of the principle tasks of this new office should be to take stock of our aid programs, outline a coherent strategy that focuses resources on institutions that are deemed most critical, and work within the U.S. government and other donor nations to ensure that there is effective coordination of these efforts at the country, regional and international levels.

Together, America and South Africa, must also do more to help other nations build a vibrant civil society.

In this great country, where civic organizations like yours helped bring down one of the most immoral regimes in history, and continue to help fight crime and AIDS, no one needs to tell you that media, faith groups, humanitarian relief organizations, professional associations, and think tanks that can sometimes do more to build up a nation than a government ever could.

When I hear the extraordinary work that these individuals are doing, I ask what's keeping us from doing more, and the answer is always "resources." Often, these resources can be small – grants of just $20,000 and $30,000 have a tremendous impact on solving both local and global problems.

Which brings me to foreign assistance and economics. I support additional foreign assistance spending and, with Senator Lugar, am urging President Bush to work with the G-8 to pursue the Millennium Development Goals. In many ways, I am working in concert with groups like the African Monitor, to in an effort to hold governments accountable for these promises.

I also support moving away from donor-client relationship in foreign aid and towards a partnership based on respect and responsibility. On the one hand, developing nations don't appreciate the sometimes heavy-handed approach used by the World Bank, IMF, and bilateral aid programs.

At the same time, corruption and mismanagement by some of these same countries make it difficult for a true partnership to emerge. If we want to get this right, both sides will have work to do and changes to make.

While outside assistance is important, strong and equitable economic growth is absolutely essential. To help spur this economic growth, we in the United States, the European Union, Japan and elsewhere can play a big part through effective, intelligent trade policies. They should ensure that developing nations have access to markets, but must also provide workers with employment opportunities that pay a decent wage.

At the same time, this will not be a cure-all. There is already evidence that South Africa, and other African nations, are losing market-share to Asian nations. This should be a clear message that tough, internal reforms are needed to stay competitive in this new environment.

This means a more effective and equitable education system, better health care, and improved programs for workers adversely impacted by these economic forces.

I should add that these problems are not unique to South Africa. They can be found in my country and around the world.

Finally, if the United States wants to form truly effective partnerships to counter the threats of the 21st century, then we must be willing devote serious efforts to building good-will and popular support for our policies among not just governments, but the people themselves.

Take the example of my father's home – Kenya. In the last few years, the United States has been asking the Kenyan government for all sorts of help in combating international terrorism. The Kenyans have, by and large, done this – but after putting in the time and resources to do so, they must also be rightly wondering why we aren't doing more to combat the immediate problems that impact their day-to-day lives.

Right now, the Nyanza province possesses one of the highest malaria rates in the world.

This is a problem that kills their children before they reach the age of five; a problem that threatens their way of life when wage-earners are too sick to work; and a problem that can be largely solved with better science, better access to treatment, and better bed nets that cost just three dollars a piece. The U.S. is already doing some good work on this, but so much more can be done.

By focusing our time and resources on problems like this, we would move beyond a zero-sum game where governments are forced to choose between their people and the United States. We would show the rest of the world that we don't simply care about problems that can arrive on our shores, we just care – period.

And in doing so, we would give an enduring legitimacy to the ideals of freedom and democracy that we so often espouse.

This means getting our own policies right. It means listening to and showing respect for our friends, allies – and our rivals. It means more effective engagement with and visits to other nations by Americans from all walks of life. And it means doing a better job of living up to the basic values on which the United States was founded.

One last thought. I realize that I offer these words of hope at a time when hope seems to have gone from many parts of the world. As we speak, there is slaughter in Darfur. There is war in Iraq.

A centuries old conflict smolders in the Middle East. Al Qaeda plots. AIDS ravages a continent.

And I have to admit – it makes me wonder sometimes whether men are in fact capable of learning from history – whether we progress from one stage to the next in an upward course, or whether we just ride the cycles of boom and bust, war and peace, ascent and decline.

But I then think of Africans breaking free from European colonialism. I think of Europeans liberated from Nazi fascism. I think of Mahatma Gandhi's quiet strength and Dr. King's forward march. I think of Polish workers standing in solidarity, and freedom riders in Mississippi.

I think of the day when the Wall came down, and the moment that Mandela was free for the first time in twenty-seven years.

And as I saw the African continent approaching out the window of our plane on my way here, I thought too about how unlikely this visit would seem to those of

my father's generation who were coming of age at a time where many African-Americans had yet to cast their first ballot and Apartheid reigned over this country.

That if you told them that just forty years later, a black man of African descent -- inspired to enter public life, in part, by African leaders -- would return to his ancestors homeland as a United States Senator, and would speak to a crowd of black and white South Africans who shared the same freedoms and the same rights, they may never have believed it.

And then I thought, things do change. And history does move forward.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." He's right but it doesn't bend that way on its own. It bends toward justice because throughout history, millions of ordinary people have found extraordinary courage to bend it.

And that today, it is up to us – sharing that same moment of life and seeking that same happiness – to take our own two hands and bend that arc towards a new and better tomorrow. Thank you.